

Help Shortage May Or May Not Be Cured By Hiring More Men

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Page 10

MERTZON — The season the Indians called “the Period of Dwindling Hopes” has arrived. Clouds have floated in from the Gulf, but the shortgrass country remains dry and devoid of greenery. Many of our citizens are so downcast that they are suspected of deliberately exposing themselves to the Hong Kong flu.

Here at the ranch, low morale isn’t the problem. The working force has been cut in half. Two of us have complete charge of the outfit. A feed dealer over in the Wool Capital hired one of our hands, and the last passport cowboy is taking a midwinter vacation in Mexico.

Feeding takes up most of the day. Pouring out \$60 or \$70 worth of cake tends to ward off the blues during the day; the proper time for worrying about feed bills is from midnight to daylight.

A couple of north-bound Mexican hands did help move one bunch of sheep last week. They stopped over for a couple of days and made passable herders. The youngest one didn’t know how to saddle a horse, and his partner required help to drive the saddle horse from the windmill to the barn.

But minor flaws like these have to be overlooked in this age. Ranchers are excited now just to hear the news that some outfit 50 miles away was able to hire a retired shoe cobbler to work part time. Nothing but a hopeless old fogey would complain about having to saddle and bridle his hired help’s horse.

The roundup turned into a sort of manhunting expedition. The fellow at the line camp would find a bunch of sheep and, if he couldn’t whistle me in, he’d ride up the small canyons and dense thickets until he flushed one of our new hands. You sure couldn’t blame those new boys for being confused. Every time I saw my only ally, he was riding along talking to himself. Any foreigner is likely to become disoriented when he has to work with a man carrying on like that. In some countries they put people away for going around blabbing such things as “what have I done to deserve this fate?” or “how have I offended Thee, O Lord.”

At lunch time we had the situation in hand. The novices knew fairly well where they’d let the sheep get away, and our old ponies acted like they could go for another two or three hours. Our deep south “secretaries” were so worn out that we figured we had a good chance of out-riding them before they could cause more trouble.

Night overtook us at the corrals. Unlike any other band of drovers, no one in our bunch seemed to be vary happy to have the work done. I guess the beauty of the setting sun must have caused the silence in our group. The walking travelers from Mexico left next day. My regular helper won’t agree to this, but I always will believe that if those two hombres had stayed around until spring we could have at least taught them to say “whoa.”

Some people never know when they’re well off.